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## *The 2024 gala weekend at Robertsbridge*

### **Introduction**

Over three memorable days in May - June 2024, RVR and K&ESR worked together on an event at Robertsbridge Junction to inaugurate the newly refurbished and installed locomotive turntable, previously at Hither Green depot.

We were also marking the granting of RVR's TWAO in summer 2023<sup>1</sup>; the start of reinstatement work on the 'missing middle' - between Northbridge Street and Junction Road; and of course the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the present day K&ESR. This collection of photographs provides a record of the weekend to complement the RVR's turntable booklet<sup>2</sup> which set out the story of the turntable project. It's designed to complement the original publication which was prepared in advance of the event.

### **Acknowledgements**

The Rother Valley Railway Supporters Association (RVRSA) have put together this look back at the gala weekend as part of its commitment to supporting the Rother Valley Railway Heritage Trust (RVRHT) and its subsidiary company Rother Valley Railway Ltd (RVR Ltd). Our shared aim is the reinstatement of the 'Sussex' end of the famous branch line which originally ran between Robertsbridge and Tenterden, and later onwards to Headcorn - the Kent and East Sussex Railway. Sponsors of the turntable project have kindly supported this publication too. We gratefully acknowledge all the many organisations and individuals who pulled together to make this event so successful for the railway.

Our thanks for the use of their photographs go to Jack Evans and the editor.

Steve Griffiths, editor, RVRSA.

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Published by the Rother Valley Railway Supporters Association, Robertsbridge Junction Station, 2024,  
Station Road, Robertsbridge, East Sussex TN32 5DG (telephone: 01580 881833; email  
reception@rvr.org.uk)

Printed by A&N Print, Cardiff

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<sup>1</sup> The turntable booklet incorrectly gave the year as 2022 (line 7 on page 5). On page 23 the unfinished sentence in the top caption should read '...with holes visible for fitting the rotating handrail. On page 24, 3<sup>rd</sup> para, add a full stop after 'fitted', and add the words 'This had to await completion....'.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of the turntable booklet are available from RVRSA at £5 each.



**Arrivals:** With a tender capacity of 4250 gallons, after trekking from Southall in West London our star guest *Britannia* may not have needed much to drink but vintage Dodge fire engine, courtesy of the Alfriston Emergency Group, was ready with a top up. *Britannia* is owned by the Royal Scot Trust, a Crewe-based charity preserving six mainline steam locomotives.



*Britannia* reversed off the mainline and onto the RVR metals witnessed by Gardner Crawley, the RVRHT Chairman (with umbrella), and a host of key players in the 3-day event. The loco was accompanied by its service vehicle and a first class corridor coach, both ex-BR Mk1s. The gala was the first time a steam locomotive has used the connection, officially opened in 2016 by Lord Peter Hendy, then chairman of Network Rail.

**Inauguration:** Day 1 of the Gala at RBJ focussed on the newly completed turntable. Mike Hart, the Chairman of RVR Ltd, was joined by other speakers including then Rail Minister and local MP Huw Merriman, and Lord Peter. It was a VIP day and a ride to Northbridge St was soon followed by refreshments.



**RVR Timeline:** 1991 RBJ site cleared. Bodiam to Quarry Farm completed in 2004. Quarry Farm section completed 2009. Udiam Farm to Junction Rd completed 2011. RBJ to Northbridge St completed 2013 and first Gala held. RVR connected to Hastings mainline 2015. Junction Road to Austen's Bridge completed (bar final tracklaying) 2017. 2024 - preparatory work began on Northbridge Street to Austen's Bridge (the final section).



Lord Hendy and Huw Merriman had a go at turning Britannia, assisted by two more VIPs at the opposite end. Here they are leaning back in order to stop the turntable in the correct position for locking and a safe exit for the locomotive. The handle they are pushing is also the locking handle.

The complete turntable weighs around 40 tons while *Britannia* weighs in at around 145 tons. The locomotive was perfectly centred and balanced, making turning much easier.

The VIPs were supervised by trained staff because this operation is not as easy as it looks. For example, on a breezy day the locomotive might catch the wind and be very difficult to stop. There are no brakes. Coordination is essential.

*Britannia* waits in the new platform at RBJ, the drizzly conditions bringing out the glossy paint job and gleaming motion.



**The MOU:** an important ceremony took place between rain showers. This was the signing of a memorandum of understanding between RVR and K&ESR. This governs how the two organisations will work together to achieve join-up and beyond.

Earlier, one of the two visiting locos was re-named by Chris Green, former director of BR's Network SouthEast, to mark K&ESR's 50 years of operation. This was GBRF's immaculately turned out 73128., in NSE colours.

L to R - Mike Hart, Simon Marsh, Gardner Crawley, Derek Bilsby



*Peter, Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill, 66718, rests on the turntable. It is operated by GBRF, which helps support the London Transport Museum (hence LT roundels).*



*73128 at the head of the shuttle service to Northbridge Street. The ex-BR Class 73 had been repainted in Network SouthEast livery especially for the occasion, at Eastleigh.*



*Britannia returns. She is a BR Standard Class 7, outshopped at Crewe works in January 1951, the first of a series of fifty-five, and the first of the twelve postwar designs. She pulled the funeral train of King George the 6<sup>th</sup>. Withdrawn by BR in 1966, and first restored in 1978.*



*Britannia and 66718 together. The sun came out for days two and three of the event! This photo hints at the steep gradient down to Northbridge Street, as the 66 is on level track which is a couple of feet higher than the camera position. Each train was topped and tailed, in line with modern practice.*



*Britannia is owned by the Royal Scot Locomotive and General Trust. She had no problem with the sharp curves at RBJ.*



*Many videos of this remarkable Gala weekend can be found on You-Tube and other websites.*